

The history of Jacob Ambaum Park rightly includes not only details of his life and times, but also the story of the roads he built and the streetcar line he invested in--both of which played a vital role in opening up the Burien area to settlement and development. . . .

On October 10, 1870 the Soloman family, one of White Center's earliest, purchased 319 acres--which included a substantial portion of present-day White Center and North Burien--from the U.S. Government. The Solomans settled near present-day S.W. 128th Street and Ambaum Boulevard--an area now known as Mayfair and Hermes Depression. Soloman hoped to drain this low area, believing that the swamp would yield rich bottomland for farming. However, after digging a 250-foot ditch connecting the Mayfair Depression with the Hermes Depression--and no closer to draining the impervious glacial formation below the surface--Soloman gave up and sold off the land. Some of the early buyers included the Jacob Ambaum family. (White Center Remembers, pp. 1-9)

A skilled "Jack-of-all-trades," Jacob Ambaum, a German immigrant, was a road builder, realtor, investor and chicken rancher. When Jacob Ambaum brought his wife Mary in 1902 to settle in the north Burien area, he did not know that the road he would build would someday bear his name.

The 20 acres of thick timber on his land was much different from Ambaum's former homes in Ohio and Germany. Ambaum's property extended from 126th to 128th S.W., and from Ambaum Boulevard to 8th Avenue S.W., including the present site of St. Bernadette's School. The land was purchased from F. M. Jordan--probably a speculator--of South Park. On the property sat an existing house which probably dated back to the 1880s. A new house was built in 1916 and the old one torn down. The Ambaums' homestead house was bordered in the front by a large gate which was eventually flanked by imported Norway spruce. A tax bill for the property dated 1904 was \$10.70.

Like Ed Soloman and other hopefuls, Ambaum tried to drain the Mayfair depression. He met with some success, but the problem of flooding after a heavy rain persisted for decades. Ambaum's daughter, Mary Ambaum deLeuw, remembered rafting across the flooded pastureland which is now the Mayfair Shopping Center. Only in spring and summer did the lake ever fully recede.

As soon as he could gather equipment and a couple of teams of horses, Ambaum set out to do some road building. He worked on the road that became known as the McKinnon Road (from Youngstown to White Center) before its name was changed to Delridge Way. The only road to town (South Park) was a branch road from the old wagon trail which went from South Park up Myers Way to Hicks Lake, and west to S.W. 112th and on to Seola Beach. The next section that Ambaum cleared was the roadbed from White Center (Roxbury) to Sam Metzler's place (S.W. 112th). A piece was later added as far as 116th S.W. and over to 12th S.W. Mike O'Day and his sons (Ed, John, Tom and Bill), with their team of horses and other pioneers (such as McCarthy, Smith, Williamson, Olson, Dahi, Cook, Budgoest, Babcock and Carr, to name a few) worked nine-hour days on the project.

By the early 20th century, all of the larger parcels of land in the area had been bought, and the latest wave of settlers was bringing the village of Burien into the new century.

Not being very accessible by steamship, however, the area was still difficult to reach and negotiate, with many settlers forced to brave the steep, muddy, abandoned logging roads.

In 1909, County commissioners proposed building a road from Riverside south along the west bank of the Duwamish River, which would generally follow the route of the incipient Burien Railroad. Jacob Ambaum was commissioned to blaze a right-of-way for the new north-south road from White Center to Burien. Although "Ambaum Boulevard" would open up the Burien area to many--ushering in a new era of growth--the road was, in its early days, "an unending river of mud through a very solid corridor of fir trees."

Originally the new road was to end at the city limits at White Center, but Burien residents successfully lobbied to have it continued into Burien. The petition for the remainder of the road--which went on to Burien and eventually to Des Moines Way--was put in by Ambaum. The road was usable from White Center to Burien, essentially at the same time that the streetcar line was finished in 1912. Ambaum Boulevard developed more or less along the trolley line in 1916. (Wonderful World of Woods and Water, p. 26)

From the Duwamish Valley News, January 14, 1916 (As reprinted in Our Burien, p. 43):

"In 1916, County Commissioners proposed to build a road which would begin at Riverside (Spokane Street today) following the West Bank of the Duwamish, by easy grade climbs the hill to the west, thence runs south to the City limits. In a general way it follows the line of the Lake Burien car line.

"At the City limits, Burien Way will stop, as far as the city is concerned, but a movement is on foot to have the highway continued on south to Lake Burien, Seahurst Park and Three Tree Point, and eventually the line will continue on to Tacoma.

"Burien Way, when completed, will open a vast, practically undeveloped territory."

The Dashleys, Mr. Schoening, Crosby and other Burien residents helped this road become a reality. The work was contracted out to Jacob Ambaum, who homesteaded in Hazel Valley in 1903. Ambaum and his family lived on his homestead until his death in 1945. Ambaum Boulevard was completed from the Seattle City limits to Des Moines Way South on 165th. "Now all our outlying areas were able to truly reach one another easily with these roads that were opened up. A new era was ready to start." (Our Burien, p. 43)

Besides his road building, Jacob Ambaum joined a number of realtors and property owners such as George White and Sam Metzler in developing the Highland Park/Lake Burien Street Car Line--also known as the "Toonerville Trolley" or "Galloping Goose." Ambaum was a shareholder in the venture. His stock certificate (#5) indicated that he owned two shares, each valued at \$100. (Ambaum, Jacob Archives, History of Seattle Municipal Railway's Division C, as posted on the internet by Rob Ketcherside).

Many people living along the line worked together to clear the right of way for the railway line. One invoice indicates that as pole and tie contractor, Ambaum provided 60[0] cross ties (piled on Right of Way) at \$.25 apiece, and 600 cedar poles at \$1.00 apiece with 10% discount. The single trolley car ran until the early 1930s on rails from

the Duwamish area to Seahurst.

The operation ran on a shoestring and the finances became so bad that the investment group asked Ambaum if he would be willing to take over the line. With his sense of humor he said, "As I understand the line only has about \$80 to its name, even I don't think that I could run a railroad on \$80." The City of Seattle subsequently took over the line after a major slide put it completely out of operation.

Paul Busse, who lived in a cabin on 10 acres near 116th S.W. and 21st S.W., worked as a "powder man" for Jacob Ambaum, and did much of the blasting work on many of the highways and roads between White Center and Burien--especially Ambaum Boulevard and the Highland Park/Lake Burien Rail Line. Busse's daughter, Minnie Katherine Jensen, recalls that while her father did not lay the rails, the tracks had a tendency to spread, making it difficult for the cars to stay on them. She would know: she rode the streetcar every day to West Seattle High School. Minnie's second husband, Chris Jensen, was a conductor on the Burien streetcar line. (White Center Remembers, pp. 60-62)

Through a community effort, Lake Burien landowners pooled their money and purchased an electric streetcar from Seattle. The line became known as the Lake Burien Railroad, with tracks laid rather more or less where they would fit without too much groundwork. They began, or ended, depending on which way you were going, at 21st S.W. and S.W. 152nd in Seahurst. They ran east to the intersection of 152nd and Ambaum, then turned and ambled down Ambaum to White Center, connecting with the Seattle line at Riverside.

The privately-financed railway was a real estate venture designed to open the south end to homeowners. The speculation paid off, for the line was a major factor in the development of the land lying within reach of its nine-mile-long track.

Stops along the line had names that are still familiar, such as Michigan Siding, Oak Park, Green, Meetum, Carrvilla, Salmon Creek, Hazel Valley and Summit. According to the old-time passengers, Green was approximately where the Green Center Trailer Park on Ambaum is presently situated. Meetum was the station close to Chelsea Park. Carrvilla was the first stop south of White Center, named after a family named Carr who lived at 100th S.W. and 16th Ave. S.W.

The line was plagued with problems: slides, power failures, caterpillars and kids. Tickets were used instead of tokens and the children's fare was two tickets for a nickel. The kids claimed they were practicing economy when they were caught hitching rides on the rear cowcatcher. Worrying about the motorman catching them, however, added a certain thrill to the ride. There were other times when the kids were not responsible for a power failure and the car was moved up a grade by old fashioned manpower, provided by the passengers.

Sometimes the kids *were* responsible for the power failure--by making a half-hitch with a rope around the trolley rod. When the car reached a high spot in the line, the rod wouldn't reach and power would be lost. Of course the kids were nowhere near the rope at the time and offered their sympathy to the motorman from their seats, which they innocently

occupied. Sometimes the motorman was thoughtful, too, and let them get fresh air and exercise by walking home.

Mother Nature assisted with an overabundance of spring caterpillars. Even if they were the fuzzy kind, they provided no traction and the car would slip backward, providing a free thrill. Sand was often released to cover the slick rails and provide enough traction to go forward again.

Landslides were serious enough to put a halt to the privately-owned line. The car was returned and the tracks deeded to Seattle. The line was repaired and service resumed and continued until 1929, when service between White Center and Seahurst was discontinued. The "Toonerville Trolley" made its last run on July 15, 1931. It was the only line of its kind in Seattle—entirely single-tracked over private right-of-way. Don Haines, of 16425 Maplewild, relates an interesting result of the Lake Burien Railroad. Through his business of surveying, he finds the streets built alongside the tracks are five feet off the center line--which proves the lasting effect of the Lake Burien Railroad.

Recalling early Burien, H. L. Virgil, 2405 S.W. 144th, related the story of the old transit line as he saw it, and the development and outmoding of the trolley that once was the pride and pleasure of the early settlers here. Mr. Virgil came to the South End in 1917 and opened a lumber business at 152nd S.W. and Ambaum road, where the Bunge lumber company now stands. His partner was T. K. Swift, who later bought Mr. Virgil's interest. The endeavor later passed to B.W. Fatheringham, who died shortly after acquiring it.

The store then passed to the Bunge-Harper company, and upon the death of Mr. Harper--who was Mrs. Bunge's uncle--the business became known as the Bunge Lumber and Hardware company. After Mr. Virgil disposed of his interest in the lumber business, he devoted many years to the development and establishment of Highline High School.

In those days, a strip of six tickets could be purchased for 25 cents for rides on our railroad. For five cents a passenger could ride from Riverside, or from the Spokane Street Bridge in Seattle, to the city limits--then, as now, Roxbury Street in White Center. For five cents more, a passenger could ride to the terminal at 22nd Ave. SW, now the site of a modern beauty parlor. Where the beauty parlor is now located, the Seahurst Land Company had its office--a timely location indeed--to serve the multitudes who were by then looking toward this part of the country for new homes.

Mr. Virgil recalled the "Five-Center" and "Ten-Center." Five-Centers got off at Roxbury Street and walked the rest of the way home, while Ten-Centers rode all the way to the end of the lines. Thus there were class distinctions, even in a new, raw wilderness, where five cents made the difference between the classes.

Then the automobile, which changed so many aspects of American life, came along with highway development, and with them came the decline of street car transportation, in the South End and nationwide. By the "law of disuse," the trolley line became of less and less value, and was finally sold to the City of Seattle. Originally, their purpose was to run it to connect with their city lines at the city limits, but time, too, took care of that. Some tracks

were removed. Some of the tracks are under the pavement on the new paved highway (Ambaum Boulevard?).

There was a conductor, or motorman, who worked on the Lake Burien car line from the beginning of its history. The old-timers will recall if he was a motorman or a conductor. It made a big difference then. Rube Larson is his name, and he could no doubt write a saga of his own. He is the last known link to the glory that was once the Lake Burien Car Line. (Our Burien)

By 1917 there were five real estate companies at Burien and six at Seahurst, an indication of the area's development. Then, with the First World War, shipyards needed poles, masts and booms for the Liberty ships. Perhaps the best-remembered shipyard was the Skinner & Eddy Company, but there was the Ames company and several others, all needing lumber for wartime shipbuilding.

Originally the rails that carried these vast timber cuttings were laid by a group of men who had contracts with the shipyards. This cleared the heavily wooded lands and paved the way for the real estate development that followed the First World War. When the war was over, there was no more need for the logging line in its original sense, so a group of civic minded individuals, by what is known as "passing the hat," raised enough money to lay lighter rails and the line was converted into a trolley line for passengers. Among the men who led this movement was George White, for whom White Center is named.

It was a long hike from Burien to the nearest streetcar at South Park until 1913, when "rapid transit" was inaugurated. The new car line ran to Burien by way of White Center. It had a schedule. According to an old account of this "fine transportation," the trip from Burien to Riverside varied between "45 minutes and four hours and 50 minutes."

The two streetcars were purchased from the city after Seattle was through with them, but the erratic timetable was not their fault. Trees fell on the trolley line, and often the power failed. The cars also had to pass a brickyard, which was using the clay bank through which the rail line was cut. The clay slid onto the tracks at annoying intervals. The passengers got out with shovels and helped clear the way. (Our Burien)

Angelo Balzarini recalls that many shipyard workers moved to Burien, since "our" railroad traveled from Burien to Riverside where one of the shipyards was. The streetcar and better roads in the district played their part in the rapid growth of the South End after 1911. Besides facilitating growth and settlement, they contributed to a subtle change in the economic organization of the community from that of the agricultural settlers to one of dependent suburbanism, characterized by the increasing numbers of families who were dependent upon their city jobs for a livelihood and who commuted because of the greatly improved transportation.

This development had an important effect on the community, dooming the Sunnydale Village to one of the corner-store variety and placing the bulk of the business on the west side (152nd and 9th S.W., or "Olde Burien") of the community.

People coming to our area in the early 1920s were attracted to the community because of the beauty and lovely trees, and also the transportation of the street car line. This car line

opened up the way for many white-collar workers coming here. Many of them settled in the Seahurst and Three Tree Point areas. (Our Burien excerpt)

The Seahurst area began to have a few stores and real estate offices. Ivan Phillips, longtime Burien resident and merchant (and also, apparently, the community's first deputy and justice of the peace), recalled before his retirement in 1964 that he came to make his home in Burien City around 1921. Before the war he'd been with the Seattle Fire Department. After seeing service in the First World War, he came to Burien and started a garage. The only road that came out this way at the time was the Des Moines road. Mr. Phillips started his garage in back of the location now occupied by the barber shop and shoemaker on 152nd S.W., across the street from Puget Sound Power & Light Company.

“Dad” Wright had a pool hall where Jamie Whiteley's store now stands. The only boardwalk in the area ran from the corner of 152nd S.W. and Ambaum Road, down to the present site of the Masonic temple. The streetcar line that came out along Ambaum Road from White Center went between the drug store on the corner and his garage, then to its terminal at Seahurst. There was no regular service; one couldn't be sure just when the car would come. Lack of power precluded the company from giving regular service, and at times the rails were in such a poor state that newcomers got seasick and had to get off because they just couldn't stand the ride. (Our Burien)

The following is an excerpt from White Center Remembers, pp. 26-29: Jacob Ambaum and others were instrumental in spurring the growth of the White Center-Burien area with the development of a streetcar line, known as the Highland Park and Burien Railway. It was conceived as part of a real estate venture aimed at developing the sparsely settled region north of Lake Burien. Taking in two previous franchises, the new line was incorporated on October 10th, 1911.

Heading south from White Center to S.W. 118th St., the line took a short semicircular detour around Salmon Creek. It continued along Ambaum to the intersection of 128th S.W., where it stopped at the Jacob Ambaum home, then continued south along Ambaum through a forest of “sylvan solitude.” The line swung westward between 151st and 152nd and continued on to Seahurst, the southern terminus of the system.

On October 16, 1913 the original builders of the rail system gifted it to the City of Seattle, provided that the City clear a slide that had wiped out a mile of track and restore service. Other than the two dilapidated Hammond cars leased from the Seattle Electric Company, there was no rolling stock, barns, shops or other structures, aside from a few waiting stations.

The Burien line—part street railway and part interurban--was unique among the electric lines of Seattle. With the track cleared, service was resumed and the Highland Park-Lake Burien line rapidly built up a lucrative business under its new management. The passenger trade was brisk. Many spans and passing tracks were built. Hauling freight became almost as profitable as passenger traffic, with cars of bricks, building materials and produce sharing the tracks with passenger cars.

But the line was short-lived. Service was discontinued to Seahurst in May, 1929. White Center was served until December 17, 1933 when a slide covered the Michigan Street siding. . . .

In addition to building roads and investing in rail lines, Jacob Ambaum was very “public spirited,” serving on the Mt. View School Board for many years. He believed in “Basic Education” and the one-room school. Financially conservative by nature, he opposed efforts by co-Board member Sam Metzler to spend public dollars on a two-room schoolhouse (even though it was needed). (White Center Remembers, p. 48)

Ambaum seemed to have close ties to the O’Day family. “Mike O’Day prevented my father from losing his property during one very hard period. He was a friend in need,” recalled Ambaum’s daughter, Mary Ambaum de Leuw. (White Center Remembers, p. 49)

"When my father retired from road building he went into the poultry business," recalled Jacob Ambaum's daughter, Mary Ambaum de Leuw. "The streetcar would stop at our gate (near S.W. 128th and Ambaum) and pick up eggs. Various little grocery stores were our customers. Good German sauerkraut delivered in large crocks was one of our specialties later on when we delivered by automobile. . . . One of my favorite pastimes was to stand in front of the window of the electric incubators to watch the eggs hatch. My folks said I would have been content to sit for hours when they sat me down among the baby chicks in the brooder house.

"We were always self-sufficient in those days. We raised our own meat, made good German sausage and grew our own vegetables and fruit. When there was illness there was just the right herb cure in the garden. During the Depression years we had dinner almost every Sunday for various friends from town, and they were afterwards loaded up with food for the coming week before they left.

"Walking was one of our favorite forms of recreation," de Leuw recalled. "We would walk everywhere . . . through the woods which is now Shorewood to the beach and then south to Three Tree Point.. Someone would always give us a glass of lemonade and friendly conversation. Many times we would also drink from the clear cold streams along the way." (White Center Remembers, pp 44-48)

Ambaum Boulevard remained unsurfaced until 1921, when it was paved as far as S.W. 112th Street. Until the 1930s, when First Avenue South was considered for paving, Ambaum, Des Moines Way and Military Roads were the main routes linking the Highline area with Seattle. (Many Roads, pp. 13-15)

As the trolley line and Ambaum Boulevard brought more people to settle in the area, dry goods stores, a bakery, gas station, auto garage and other businesses sprouted along Ambaum and S.W. 152nd. ("Burien’s Early History," City of Burien Website) Nevertheless, even in the 1930s, the Highline area remained "a community of chicken farms, greenhouses and truck gardeners hauling produce to the Seattle Public Market." (Highline School District Chronicle, Carl Jensen, 1981)

In an attempt to possibly kickstart, or revive, "Streetcar Nostalgia," Burien in the late

1940s installed its own trolley diner--first at 149th & Ambaum, and later at 14624 Ambaum Road. Lloyd's "Trolley Lunch" Diner, featuring "Food With That Home Cooked Taste," was operated by Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd Harmon, well known restaurateurs in the South End. It contained 11 stools and a fountain in the main car section.

Ambaum Boulevard was widened to four lanes in the 1950s to accommodate the increased traffic from local housing developments. A multi-million dollar paving and utilities improvement project was completed late in 1977, resurfacing and widening Ambaum Boulevard from White Center to Burien, and creating the modern four-lane, north-south arterial between Burien and Seattle. (Salmon Creek Neighborhood Plan, Oct. 2004, p. 9-10)

In 2002, the City of Burien determined that its Northwest sector was especially lacking in open and recreational space, with Chelsea Park being the main neighborhood park. And, with heavy traffic restricting access to Chelsea Park for those living west of Ambaum Boulevard, there was no active park within walking distance for children and young adults at the north end of the Ambaum corridor.

The Burien Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan identified a priority for developing a neighborhood park to serve residents west of Ambaum and north of S.W. 132nd Street. The Burien city staff identified several properties that might qualify as a park, with a requirement that the site selected must also provide visibility and safety for park users.

In 2001 the city staff had identified two parcels on the Ambaum corridor just north of 128th S.W. that, if purchased together, would provide space for a "playtoy" for children as well as space for a sports court for teens and adults. City staff and real estate consultants tried to reach voluntary purchase agreements with both property owners. The owner of the south parcel was not interested in selling to the City, making condemnation (the option of last resort) likely for acquisition. The owner of the north parcel was willing to sell to the City.

The Suyama Family Limited Partnership granted PTN LOT 5, Block 26 Jordan's Acre Gardens, Vol. 7 Page 84 to the City for \$190,000 on March 25, 2003. Plans for the new Jacob Ambaum Park include the playground and fully developed basketball courts, restroom, picnic areas and plaza gathering space. Phase I Construction of the park was completed in February 2007, and the park opened for public use. The complete project design was expected to be completed in March, 2007 and construction to begin in May, 2007. (City of Burien Agenda Bill, August 5, 2002, Larry Fetter, Director of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Arts)